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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the cataloging, shelf arrangement, and preservation of Wayne State University's Eloise Ramsey collection of children's books. It also outlines Wayne State's efforts to consolidate the collection and to make it accessible to the public. (FM)

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TREASURES IN THE PUBLIC TRUST:

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY AS CARETAKER FOR THE ELOISE RAMSEY COLLECTION OF LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

by

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THE HERITAGE AND THE DILEMMA

Eloise Ramsey never really retired from Wayne State University. Almost until her death in 1964, and certainly until she was well into her eighties, she continued to preside regally, carefully and even jealously over a large, diverse and extremely valuable collection of children's books in the Education library, a collection she began and to which she constantly was adding. After her death, it was handsomely augmented by her own very fine personal collection of children's books, and has been growing ever since.

"The Ramsey Collection of Literature for Young People" is an ambitious panorama of the entire field of children's book publishing, with volumes from earliest to most recent times representing the emergence of the multifarious concepts and forms in juvenile literature. Miss Ramsey had selected books on the basis of their originality or an unusual or superior way of production, and these criteria have remained basically those used for subsequent acquisitions. The collection includes some genuinely rare, early books, many first editions, signed copies and beautiful examples of many illustrators. There are extensive holdings of Hans Christian Andersen and G.A. Henty, numerous foreign language children's books, some nineteenth and early twentieth century periodicals and a variety of sources about children's literature.

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Unhappily, these materials were never all in one place, and over the years have been scattered in several locations. Because of this, because later acquisitions have often been left in their original cartons in these various places and because books have been added sometimes rather casually to this collection from the other Wayne libraries, it is not even possible to state exactly how many volumes are now in the collection. There may be as many as seven thousand.

This problem has been compounded by the fact that there has never been enough money available to hire the people needed to devote attention even to locating all the parts of the collection, much less to devising a new catalogue or a workable conservation program. Without money and without people, how can a library like Wayne State's begin to know what treasures it houses, or to share this knowledge with others? What can any institution, given the same deprivations, do to pull together and revitalize such an inheritance in order to attract both researchers and funds to its cause?

Undoubtedly, the first task for the institution is to develop some program for the arrangement and preservation of its collection, no matter how straitened its budget and staff. And second, and perhaps more important, is the necessity of publicizing as widely as possible these plans, for the present and for the future, in order to attract sufficient money to save the collec- from deterioration or eventual loss.

A NEW PROGRAM FOR THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE RAMSEY COLLECTION

At Wayne State, a simple, practical program is now underway for the resuscitation of the Ramsey Collection. This program, with no rigid time limitations because of its dependence upon volunteer and student help, deals with both the organization and conservation of the collection for the present and in the future. The first task, of course, has been to bring together as many of the dispersed volumes as could be found so the collection could at least be seen as a whole; and this is almost completed. Next, even though the collection is closed to the browsing public because of its rarity, the books are being placed on the shelves in a manner which will make them more accessible to the librarian responsible and, thus, to the inquiring researcher. Therefore, the initial step in the reorganization of these holdings has been the development of a rational shelf arrangement for addition and retrieval.

Naturally, real accessibility to this collection will eventually require an entirely new card catalogue when and if money ever becomes available to hire the appropriately trained personnel. The existing catalogue badly needs reorganizing and updating. Added entry cards on illustrators and compilers need to be included, as does the information on Miss Ramsey's numerous scholarly notes, now tucked more or less willy-nilly in many volumes. Nevertheless, until such a time arrives, at least the revised shelf arrangement, which is nearly finished and is described below, will provide some logical access into this magnificent collection.

Miss Ramsey herself had invented a complex shelf arrangement for "her" collection in which she took tremendous pride.

She divided the materials into several categories, with a preponderance of works being assigned to the one she called "literature", which included not only all fiction, but picture books, poetry, plays, and collections thereof, "oral" and other folk traditions and even toy books. These large categories were further divided by chronological period, dating from before 1658 (the publication date of Orbis Pictus) through the existing present (1960's). Yet, when the books already on the shelves set aside for the collection were examined, this area/chronology system was confused, with some books separated in the intended manner--ie. by category and then period--and others lumped together by period regardless of category.

Therefore, it seemed apparent from the outset that the system Miss Ramsey had devised for this collection was unwieldy, difficult to understand and plainly not working in actual practice. Furthermore, shelf space had become a major consideration, and it was clear that whatever system was followed most of the books already on the shelves would have to be relocated to allow for the accumulated additions. Although her categories were not useful in their existing demarcations, it was difficult to develop others and arrange them in a logical and flexible way on the shelves, and it was impossible to move all the books at once so that an entirely new system might be contrived. In truth, no books could be left anywhere unattended because the shelf area is in the middle of the library and traffic there is too free and casual.

At last it was decided, for the above reasons and because this had indeed been Miss Ramsey's collection, to retain as much as possible of her shelf arrangement, though with profound modi-

fications. As previously noted, the guiding principle in this reorganization was to make the collection more accessible, and it is to be hoped that now the new arrangement is simple and versatile enough to make addition and retrieval of books an easy process.

THE REVISED SHELF ARRANGEMENT: FIRST STEP TOWARDS REORGANIZATION

Since the "literature" grouping was by far the largest and most awkward, it was the first dealt with and was very quickly reduced to include only fiction. The other categories originally in it--such as poetry and plays--were separated out and kept by themselves as they would be in most other library collections.

Miss Ramsey divided this area, as she did them all, into chronological periods, broken by dates significant in the publication of children's books. Because she really was a scholar in this field, these chronological periods for fiction have been retained until 1910. After that date, this category has been divided by decade, for the publishing of children's books has become big business in recent times, and fictional materials are being rapidly added for all the decades since the war.

Miss Ramsey also put what she called "oral tradition" and "epic poetry" under the literature umbrella, although such subjects do not fall in the Dewey designation of 800-899 for literature. Now these books have been physically placed after "religion", loosely following the Dewey concept. "Epic poetry" was renamed "mythology and epics", roughly arranged by country of origin, and then fables, folk tales and "oral traditions" followed. These were organized according to the exigencies of the collection, in a somewhat chronological fashion, beginning Aesop. More recent folk literature,however, has been broken down by country or area of origin, arranged alphabetically by place. In this manner, it

is as easy to retrieve any of the innumerable versions of Cinderella as to locate a collection of Armenian folk tales published by an unknown editor at an unspecified date.

The Dewey system was more particularly applied in dealing with another large category Miss Ramsey grandly called "subject matter", which comprised all non-fiction, regardless of subject, and biography. Volumes were loosely grouped together at first according to general Dewey number, and later arranged more specifically when the size of each category was ascertained. The social sciences (300's), languages (400's) and applied sciences (600's) had only a small number of books in each, so these disciplines were simply shelved alphabetically by author, in a numerically sequential way. In contrast, larger collections like the pure sciences (500's) and history (900's) were further divided in ways suggested by the holdings themselves, and neither by Miss Ramsey's chronological periods (which refer only to <u>publishing</u> dates.).

The last of Miss Ramsey's largest groupings was "children's foreign books", which included books in their original language, books translated into another non-English language and translations of English language books. When the shelf rearrangement project was begun, it was hoped that these foreign language books might be integrated into the rest of the collection, especially in the case of the translations of certain popular English language volumes, but shelf space basically prevented this unification from occurring.

Unfortunately, these books remain unarranged, and are still in several places. Any shelf arrangement for them will pose dif-

ficulties. Miss Ramsey kept to her chronological system more or less, but, frankly, that seems less satisfactory than organization, say, by country or language. None of the holdings from any country warrant the chopping by period she recommended.

PRESERVING THE TREASURE

The second aspect of the program at Wayne State to breathe new life into the Ramsey Collection is more particularly concerned with conservation. Years of lying carelessly on shelves, in cardboard boxes, under dusty ventilators and in hot, sunbaked cabinets have done nothing to add to the longevity of these materials. Obviously, as books have been placed on the shelves, they have been lightly dusted, and the more offensive extraneous materials like paper clips, staples and brittle, yellowed newspaper clippings have been taken out. The next step, of course, will be to remove all extra papers, tissues and plastic covers, keeping logical track of Miss Ramsey's notes, so the information can be eventually transferred onto catalogue cards.

Many of the older books are either very small or fragile, and should be put in acid-free envelopes for safekeeping on the shelves. Fortunately, the book preparation department for the Wayne State University Libraries in general is very willing to order such envelopes for the Ramsey Collection, as well as being willing to supply acid-free tags and book plates. Placement of th[illegible]rmer in books which have no identification on the spine will minimize the need to open them more than necessary.

Since the books are kept in glass cases, the twin problems of light and heat have been most vexing. Ultra-violet shielding for the glass has already been purchased and when in place it should certainly reduce the fading of book covers by sunlight.

Temperature is a far more difficult matter as the cabinets are equipped with neither thermostats nor humidity regulators. But, alas, it seems clear at present that such sophistocated environmental controls cannot be realistically considered for the immediate future of the collection.

Many of these little tasks still need to be done, but, though time-consuming, they are not in themselves costly. In the future, should there be funds available for more effective and venturesome restoration work, possibly a small laboratory with a ventilator and work table can be set up in one of the library offices where simple tasks like cleaning and preserving leather bindings, restitching broken spines, removing pressure-sensitive tape and repairing tears might be done.

THE SPECIAL COLLECTION, THE PUBLIC CUSTODIAN AND THEIR FUTURE

Unlike many specialized collections of its sort, the Ramdey Collection was never a private one, subsequently donated to a public institution for its safekeeping. Nonetheless, when it was begun, its future was considered secure since it was under the protection of such an institution, and, as a result, presumably would not suffer easy loss from sale, theft or fire. Yet, it is now clear that these establishments may not, in fact, be the best custodians for rare collections. Like Wayne State University, many lack not only funds but a staff with either adequate time or skill to care for these materials. It is not enough to allow the collections merely to reside in a building. They need at least minimal attention in their storage conditions and general cleanliness. Moreover, if they are to be available at all to scholars and researchers (and what other function can they possibly have in a public institution?), they must

be carefully organized and safeguarded.

The program devised for the Ramsey Collection at Wayne State is certainly modest enough. Most public institutions in these lean times cannot afford elaborate plans for anything, much less such plans for their special collections which have only special appeal. But it is a fact that this university is the repository of this collection, and as such has a responsibility towards it and its potential public. The program that has been set forth includes both aspects of this responbility. The collection has already been made more accessible to the librarian and, therefore, the researcher, and the first simple stage of the conservation plan is now underway.

Indeed, the development of the program for the Ramsey Collection at Wayne State is an earnest, a pledge of the university's serious intentions towards the revitalization and the future of the collection. But the real hope for the tomorrows of these collections lies beyond the scope of the parent institutions alone. It rests more truly with public concern and generosity. Only when adequate funds are available for hiring people skilled in both organizational and archival work, for purchasing minimal conservation equipment and for setting up and guaranteeing a long term program in relation to these holdings, ought they to remain in public hands.